Abortion as a philosophical controversy

- Karol Józef Wojtyła (1920–2005)
  - aka John Paul II: Roman Catholic pope (1978–2005), theologian, philosopher
  - author of Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life), encyclical about abortion and euthanasia
- Evangelium Vitae shows how the church’s position on abortion depends on deep philosophic premises, in:
  - ethics
  - metaphysics
  - epistemology

The ethics of abortion

- Q: Why would the Pope oppose abortion even if it only involved abandoning a child?
  - because abandoning (or killing) a child for convenience is selfish
- Q: Why is selfishness immoral?
  - because the Pope says God commands us to be our brothers’ keepers

The ethics of abortion

- Q: What is the Pope’s major thesis about abortion?
  - (A) “Pro-life” (B) “Pro-choice”
- Q: Do you agree with this position on abortion?
  - (A) Yes (B) No
  - this is obviously an ethical position in and of itself
  - but it depends on a variety of deeper ethical principles

The ethics of abortion

- The Pope thinks abortion is immoral under any circumstance
  - (in part) because abandoning (or killing) a child for convenience is selfish
  - (in part) because the Pope says God commands us to be our brothers’ keepers

The ethics of abortion

- ethical altruism is the theory that serving the interests of others is the primary purpose of morality.
- the Pope (and Christianity) side with altruism against egoism
- But why does the Pope support this theory?
The ethics of abortion

- **Q**: Why does this Pope oppose abortion insofar as it does involve killing?
  - The moral gravity of procured abortion is apparent in all its truth if we recognize that we are dealing with murder and, in particular, when we consider the specific elements involved. The case illustrated is a human being at the very beginning of life. — Pope John Paul II, Evangelium Vitae.
  - The embryo/fetus is an innocent human being.
  - Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves “the creative action of God”, and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of Life from its beginning until its end: no one, in any circumstance, can claim for himself the right to destroy directly an innocent human being.” With these words the Instruction Evangelium Vitae sets forth the central content of God’s revelation on the sacredness and inviolability of human life.
  - killing an innocent human being is immoral
  - This can be distilled into a simple argument.

- **The Pope’s anti-abortion argument:**
  - Premise 1: It is wrong to kill innocent human beings.
  - Premise 2: Fetuses are innocent human beings.
  - Conclusion: Therefore, it is wrong to kill fetuses.

- **Q**: Why does the Pope think premise 1 is true?
  - there is a divine commandment saying “Thou Shalt not kill”
  - deeper: God is the creator of life, it’s up to him to decide who lives/dies

- **Q**: Why does the Pope think premise 2 is true?
  - offers scientific evidence: the embryo/fetus has human genetic potential
  - deeper: a point related to divine command theory...

The ethics of abortion

- **Q**: Do you agree with the conclusion?
  - (A) Yes   (B) No

- This argument has premises that are definitely relevant: if you agree with the premises, logically the conclusion must be true
- so why think the premises are true?
Metaphysics

Q: What does the Pope think about the world we see around us?
- Man is called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God. The fullness of this supernatural vocation reveals the greatness and the inestimable value of human life, even its temporal phase. Life in time, in fact, is the fundamental condition, the initial stage and an integral part of the unified process of human existence; it is a process which, unexpectedly and wonderfully, is enlightened by the promise and sealed by the gift of divine life, which will reach its full realization in eternity (cf. 1 John 3:2). At the same time, it is through this supernatural calling which highlights the relative character of each individual's earthly life. After all, life on earth is not an "ultimate" but a "penultimate" reality, even so, it remains a sacred reality entrusted to us. --Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*

- It's not all there is: there is a supernatural reality.

Supernaturalism is the theory that there is a dimension of reality independent of the world accessible by observation and logic.

- Note how he is saying: human life is valuable because of its supernatural stage.

Epistemology

Q: How does the Pope claim to know any of this?
- In circumstances, in purpose, no law whatsoever can ever stand fast as an absolute, since it is contrary to the Law of God which is written in every human heart, knowable by reason itself, and proclaimed by the Church. --Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*

- "Knowable by reason itself" (logic and evidence):
  - the anti-abortion argument itself attempts to be logical
  - one of its premises is partially scientifically informed
- "Proclaimed by the Church" (scripture and authority):
  - "written in every human heart" (personal faith)

Fideism is the view that some beliefs can be justified by faith, not by reason or evidence.

Wrap-up quiz

Graded iClicker QUIZ: Select the best single answer

3. The Pope's ultimate reason for thinking we should not kill innocent human beings is that:
   (A) It is unkind to kill innocent human beings
   (B) Only God has the right to give and take life
   (C) Other people's lives are of great personal benefit to us
   (D) All of the above

4. The Pope claims that abortion is immoral because:
   (A) He argues for it based on premises supported by the Bible
   (B) It says so explicitly in the Bible
   (C) He thinks everyone agrees it is true